

Embers of War: The Fall of An Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam

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Reviewer: Scott Midgley

7 May 1954 is a day that helped to alter the course of American history. It was on this day that French troops, under siege for two months by Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh forces, were roundly defeated, signaling the end of France's efforts to re-exert control over its former Southeast Asian colony. American involvement, however, was to begin to ramp up and continue for the next 21 years.

Fredrik Logevall's 'Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam', is a fascinating examination of the decades leading up to American escalation and direct troop involvement in 1965. Logevall does an excellent job in his historical analysis, not suggesting any one factor existing as the primary determinant of the eventual outcome in Vietnam, but rather surmising that the story is a product of 'alternative political choices, major and minor, considered and taken, reconsidered and altered, in Paris and Saigon, in Washington and Beijing, and in the Vietminh's headquarters in the jungles of Tonkin. It's a reminder to us that to decision makers of the past, the future was merely a set of possibilities'.

It is these choices, driven as they were by political and cultural factors both inside and outside Vietnam itself, that show the repetition of flawed and mistaken strategy by the French and then the Americans, to understand the driving forces behind the Vietnamese experience in any way. This was further distorted by the balancing act of appeasing the European colonial powers, France and Great Britain, Roosevelt's desire to aid development and future independence, and the shifting geopolitical map and spheres of influence that arose after Second World War. Roosevelt spoke passionately about his dislike for European colonialism and imperialism, often suggesting that American involvement in the war was partly the responsibility of the Europeans. 'There has never been, there isn't now and there never will be, any race of people on earth fit to serve as masters over their fellow men ... We believe that any nationality, no matter how small, has the inherent right to nationhood'. Early in the war, Roosevelt would press the issue of his anti-colonial sentiment, only to be rebuffed for fear of creating a chasm in the alliance.

By the time that Truman assumed the presidency after Roosevelt's death, the landscape had changed. Logevall points out that Ho Chi Minh had allied himself with the Americans during the war against Japan, but the increasing pressure from several sides rendered a continuation virtually impossible. The Vietminh

were not just a nationalist party, but also Communist. This political reality placed the United States squarely in a conundrum. Logevall argues that we could have continued support of Ho Chi Minh, facilitating independence, but also creating a communist state in Southeast Asia. Additionally, this support of Ho and refusing French requests for military aid to combat the Vietminh ran the risk of losing French support in confronting the Soviet threat throughout Europe. This placed the administration in a very awkward position of trying to honor alliances while balancing the stated desires, at least publicly under Roosevelt, of fostering independence and supporting self-determination. The United States needed to weigh the various options available, and decide what it deemed the least damaging.

In retrospect, the American path only aided the French in prolonging what turned out to be the inevitable; indeed, the French vastly underestimated the strength and resolve of the Vietminh, and their uncanny ability to adapt to circumstances in the field. The French seemed to view the reclamation of what they considered their 'crown jewel' in Southeast Asia as a foregone conclusion, when in fact they failed to not only grasp their own severe shortcomings and future reliance on the United States financially, where regional sentiment would ultimately lie in the struggle, but how determined Ho and the Vietminh were to resist.

Conventional wisdom now reflects the assumption that the sheer passion for nationalism and demands for self-determination were keys to Ho's ultimate victory over the French, and the subsequent stalemate with the American war machine. Logevall might have examined this more closely in an effort to examine Ho's motivations, because they were not merely nationalist in nature. Upon ascension to power in the North, Ho ordered large-scale political assassinations of non-communists and massive land reforms in the wake of the Geneva Accords, further consolidating power in the North. A greater understanding of these factors would generate debate as to what Ho's true motivations were, and might dispel a bit of the mythology of Ho's nationalism. In a very real sense, the conflict was both 'nationalist' as well as 'political-ideological'. Ho Chi Minh was in fact a very dedicated Communist. Assuming that political ideology played a distant secondary role in this conflict is shortsighted. Attempts to dismiss that aspect of the conflict only complicate attempts at analysis.

Through Logevall's detailed research, readers are able to get a true sense of how diplomacy and politics played a huge role in American decision making during these years. Understanding that there was serious debate within the administration as to what role the United States should play is a very important aspect to how decisions were made, and the ramifications of those decisions. Equally important, Logevall describes the dichotomy within Eisenhower's decision making. Although Eisenhower did not publicly support sending American troops into the field, he very readily embraced the 'domino theory', which would come to dominate American Cold War foreign policy decisions for the next several decades. Much like Korea and other emerging 'hot spots' throughout the world, Eisenhower was committed to not letting the South fall into Ho's hands, and felt the best course of action was to prop up Diem's regime as a way of doing so. As was so often the case during Vietnam, the United States failed to truly understand Ho's resolve.

None of this is to say that Ho did not face large problems of his own. His land reforms, which he ultimately abandoned, were a source of contention, as they were unpopular. One of Ho's biggest hurdles was that he wanted to consolidate power, but simultaneously wanted to appear as a nationalist, which would appeal to the Vietnamese people. Ultimately, the Vietminh were able to adapt, at least publicly, and the United States was either unwilling or incapable of doing so. It was a clear indication that the United States had learned very little from the French experience there, in what Logevall describes as 'self-delusion'. The idea being that despite substantial evidence to the contrary, American decision makers convinced themselves that the American experience and the French experience were not the same, and had no correlation to one another.

Ultimately, Logevall contends that the attitude of the United States was that it could be successful where the French failed, but the greatest flaw in that assessment was to ignore not only the Vietminh resistance, but also failure to accurately gauge the attitudes and interests of the South Vietnamese people. They were being used as pawns in a political chess match, where entire governments were being built and propped up by what they saw as another colonial power. In many ways, the Diem regime was worse for the South Vietnamese

than the Vietminh. Despite the fact that Diem was stridently anticommunist, he was also not a nationalist. His ruling interest lay in maintaining a class structure that would allow for continued control over the peasants and farmers that made up much of the nation. The realization never occurred to the American decision makers that they were yet another foreign power exerting imperial control on the Vietnamese people, and sentiment would ultimately begin to shift to Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh, further complicating an already muddled and disjointed American approach.

To simply expect to win based on military might and deep pocketbooks, the Americans arrogantly miscalculated, ignoring the very real political component of the conflict, and choosing to ignore history. Additionally, the broadening of the Cold War, and the expectation by much of Western Europe that the United States would shoulder much of the financial and military burden in deterring Soviet aggression there, probably contributed to a lack of specific planning and strategy as it pertained to the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Using prior strategy of conventional war as their guide, decision makers mistakenly developed plans and strategies that would not apply in Vietnam. By the time that Johnson committed to ground troops and direct confrontation in 1965, Ho's forces were battle-tested and American troops were in no way prepared for the opposition that they would face for the next decade.

Logevall has written a fascinating book, perhaps the definitive work on this aspect of the greater Vietnam issue. Most do not understand the importance of the events that led to direct American involvement, and this is a very accessible, well-researched work that captures how and why decisions were made during and after the French disaster. This was a very crucial time period, where much of the American strategy was developed, and it reveals the wrong assumptions, self-delusion, and miscalculations that were an enormous part of the American experience there. These are important pieces to more full understanding American involvement, and ultimately, American failure.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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